RESTRICTIONS ON THE USE OF ORAL HISTORY MATERIALS

The Idaho Oral History Center collection is the product of more than fifteen years of interviewing. The nature of oral history and the age of some interviews mean that special care must be taken to insure that the collection is used to its fullest potential but protected from abuse.

Researchers are urged to listen to tapes of interviews instead of relying on transcripts. Transcripts should contain all of the information given in an interview, but characteristic expressions, voice inflection, and the personality of the narrator--all important elements of an interview--do not appear in a transcript. In addition, some transcripts in this collection have been typed in rough draft and edited, but the final copy has not yet been prepared. These rough drafts have been stamped "Rough Draft--Use With Tape."

Researchers should also be aware that transcripts are typed from the recorded interview with only minor editorial changes to improve readability. It is the responsibility of the researcher to verify information and dates against other oral and written sources.

Oral history interviews are protected by the 1976 copyright law. Both interviewer and narrator must sign a release before the interview may be used by anyone; **however, the signing of a legal release does not open an interview to unrestricted use.** Legal releases obtained by interviewers for this collection stipulate that the information in the interviews may not be published or used in a public presentation without the written permission of the Idaho Oral History Center, 450 N. Fourth Street, Boise, ID 83702, or the copyright holder, as listed below. When quoting from an interview, the following bibliographic form is recommended: John Grey, Interviewed by Mary Hall. Boise: Idaho Oral History Center, January 11, 1994.

This copy of the interview is not for resale, nor should the researcher allow others to reproduce either the tape recording or the transcript.

Narrator: Idaho Purce

OH Number: 1411

Additional Restrictions: none

Copyright held by: Oral History Center/Idaho State Historical Society

IDAHO ORAL HISTORY CENTER
IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
450 N. 4th St.
Boise, Idaho 83702

RELEASE OF TAPES TO THE IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY'S ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM.

Date of recording May 12, 1996

We, Idaho Purce (Narrator), Kelly Watts (Interviewer)
hereby give, grant and donate this (these) tape recording(s) and subsequent transcripts made by us, along with any and all rights therein to the IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY and n/a as a gift for such scholarly and educational purposes, as at their sole discretion they shall determine, subject to any restrictions listed below.

Restrictions:

Please send me a copy of the tape.

Idaho J. Purce
Narrator

448 N 6th St.
Address

Interviewer

Address

OH 1411

TAPE SUMMARY

NARRATOR: Idaho Purce
INTERVIEWER: Kelly Watts
DATE: May l 2, 1996
SPONSOR/PROJECT: Women and Political Activism in Idaho

Tape Counter	Page Numbers	Summary
		SIDE 1
001	1	Idaho's family came to Idaho in 1913; she was born in Pocatello; her father died when young and her mother raised five children alone; her mother was very active in church activities; education important to her mother
028	1	At the age of 13 Idaho helped organize the Sunshine Group at the Y[WCA], a club for African-American women; group had activities but was equally important as a support group for African-American women to just get together and talk
075	3	Talks about segregation in Pocatello before civil rights legislation; all ethnic and racial groups--blacks, Japanese, Chinese, Mexicans, Italians, Greeks, etc.--all lived in the "triangle area" and many worked for the railroad; there was a soda fountain in the neighborhood where they could get take out but they couldn't eat it there; the Rialto Theatre had a segregated area on left side of theatre for blacks, Mexicans, and Native Americans; Italian and Greek considered white so they could sit where they wanted
116	4	Idaho was involved in the first Pocatello civil rights group called "the committee;" organized to defuse potential violence by educating local business owners about new civil rights legislation; also worked to open doors of employment to minorities; the group was strongly supported by ISU professors; white members of the committee would pressure restaurant owners to abide by civil rights laws
155	6	Idaho was the first African-American hired by the state employment job service but the job service was good about hiring women; older employees gave her a cold shoulder; job consultants usually

		referred minority applicants to maid positions instead of better jobs; she believes she was instrumental in opening up doors; she also did outreach into the community to find minority applicants to fill employer's requests for minority applicants; later she became supervisor of the federal job training programs in the area
255	9	Her husband and children are proud of what she was doing and have become active themselves
300	11	She was a member of community organizations like the Soroptimist Club; also active in the Gardenia Club, a social group for African-American women; her husband was a member of a black Mason's lodge and she was in Eastern Star, there was also was a black Elks lodge and a black American Legion in Pocatello; Idaho has been a voting registrar for a number of years; and her husband is a precinct official
399	13	She talks about some of the unresolved issues for women; on the abortion issue, she feels people should recognize that women have the right to make a decision about what happens to their body; another issue is the need for good child care so women can return to work
		SIDE 2
001	14	Continues discussion of unresolved issues for women; she feels affirmative action legislation was only reason women and minorities have made advances in jobs and the main thrust of the legislation is still valid; she is concerned about recent hate organizations and violence against minorities in Idaho Falls; she feels President Reagan damaged race relations
116	18	**END OF INTERVIEW**

OH 1411

Purce, Idaho (May 12, 1996)

Names and Places in the Text

Pocatello, Idaho

OH 1411

NARRATOR: Idaho Purce
INTERVIEWER: Kelly Watts
DATE: May 12, 1996
LOCATION: Pocatello, ID
PROJECT: Women and Political Activism in Idaho

SIDE 1

KW: I'm talking today with Idaho Purce of Pocatello, and if you want to start then with family background, that's where we will start. Okay.

IP: I come from a family of, I guess, nine siblings. My parents have 10 children. My parents were pioneers, they who came to Idaho in 1913. They settled first down in Arimo, Idaho and lived there for seven years. Three of my older siblings were born there. I was born in Pocatello. After seven years, my parents moved to Pocatello from Arimo. I was born in Pocatello. All of my life, my mother was very active in the church, holding several offices, positions, in the church. I might say that my father died when I was very young. In fact, I hardly knew my father. My father raised five children alone. My mother was--education was very important to my mother. She instilled the importance of that in all of us children and, also, I think, because my mother was very active as a volunteer in church and also participating in [words unclear] in other church activities within the community, it was just natural to see Mom going, getting dressed and going to some meeting. At an early age, I think early age of 13, I helped organized what we called the Sunshine Group at the YWCA. It was a group of young African-American women. We met every Thursday at the Y[WCA], and we did different kinds of

© Idaho State Historical Society

activities. It's real hard now to remember all that we did, but it was just sort of more important than doing an activity was just gathering together and talking about what was going on in our lives and how we saw our community. It was an activity that was developed and encouraged by the then director of the Y. I thought I'd never forget her name, but I can't recall it right now at the moment. I'd like to say this is my earliest involvement and, I guess, the role that my parents played was the role that my mother played. She had the greatest influence in my life in terms of the kind of volunteerism that I have continued to do from age 13 to age we will not talk about today. I also instill this in my children. I felt it was very necessary to always give something back into the community and always be involved in your community and also being involved in school. I, myself, was one, with another African-American, at time of graduation, we--what did we do?

[Tape turned off and on]

We wrote the words and the music to our senior song that was sang at the graduation, and the name of the song was "Our Senior Prayer." Somehow it was very inspiring at that time of graduation. I graduated at the height of the war [World War II], just as the war was ending, so I'd seen a lot of my classmates leaving school to go and enlist in the war and, some of them, getting, receiving word--some of them had lost their lives. So, our senior prayer song was very meaningful and very--a song that other generations of graduates have always been told about, the class of '44's senior prayer song.

KW: I was reading in [words unclear] and I don't know what's really important or not without looking back through the records, I imagine there was quiet a lot of dissension [words unclear] between the African-American community and the white community here in Pocatello. Do you really feel growing up that that had any effect on your life?

IP: Could you clarify what you mean dissension?

KW: Well, let's see. I was reading, I think, that there were--black Americans weren't allowed to go into restaurants during this period, I think it was in the '60s, I was reading and that there's a lot of hate and fights that were breaking out.

IP: Well, prior to the Civil Rights Act, Pocatello was segregated to many, not only African-Americans but other minorities, living in what we called the "triangle area", that's the area from Pocatello Avenue to Center Street to Oak to Sixth. Within that area, African-Americans lived and Japanese and Chinese and Mexicans and Italians and Greeks, and all of these people lived and worked. Parents of my playmates worked for the railroad, and that was the center of employment. There was a soda fountain within our community. It was on Third Street on the corner of--it was between Third and Second Street. African-Americans and Mexicans were allowed to go in and buy ice cream cones, but we had to take them out of the restaurant; we could not eat them there. Also, there was a movie theater called "The Rialto" that was right there on Center Street, and it had a segregated area, eight designated rows of seats on the left side of the theater, which was designated

for African-Americans and Native Americans and Mexicans. Of course, our Italian friends and Greek friends were considered white so they sat wherever they wanted within the theater. Early as desegregation came to the nation, it also came to Pocatello, and there was a time when we had the noted "InkSpot" singers who came to Pocatello and they went out to what is now, and that establishment is still here, called the Motor Inn. It's a bar [words unclear], and they were refused service. In fact, some of the patrons, one of the--the president at that time of the NAACP was called, and he went out, took it to the establishment to see what was going on. One of the white patron of the establishment--I mean I guess he was a person that was there every day and everyone knew him within that establishment, he took up the fight then. He cut the side, left side I believe, of the face of the NAACP president, and charges were brought against him. I think he spent two years in prison so that was, I think, the fight that you probably read about. It was like in the '60s, right after the Civil Rights Act was passed.

KW: So, you were probably very politically active at this time?

IP: Yes, I was. I was involved in the first Pocatello civil rights organization. We called ourselves a committee, and we organized. At that time, I think it was very necessary because we were aware that the Civil Rights Act was going to be passed. It was going to become law, and it was going to--that the restaurants and public accommodation was now going to be free, the hotels and restaurants, to all. It was necessary to have an organization that could then address this with the local

businesses in a way that hopefully to diffuse any sort of violence that might take place just out of the fact that some businesses were not aware of the new law. We also organized to open up the doors of employment because that was now a barrier that was coming down and, hopefully, you know, African-Americans and other minorities could be hired and should be hired. So, that was the purpose of the Civil Rights Movement Committee that was organized here in Pocatello, and it was strongly supported by many of the professors at ISU. Several of them were president and members.

KW: Did you face a lot of opposition?

IP: Well, it was--opposition, yes, because African-Americans and Hispanic, Mexican people, and Native Americans would go into a restaurant to eat, and they were told, "Sorry, we don't serve you." Then, white members of the committee would go in and be served and, then, they were also--would tell the proprietor that, you know, "You know that there's a civil rights law that, you know, we cannot discriminate. I saw that you just refused that African-American or whoever." You know, they would be there at the time that the refusal took place that they were actually involved in seeing it happen, and that way, that brought about some education. About that time, the State Human Rights Commission was established, and they were established to enforce Title VII employment law. So, it did take a lot of education over a number of years to break that down and also within restaurants and hotels, accommodation, all public accommodation.

KW: What is the biggest issue that you feel has been most important to you? Or can you single out one?

IP: Well, I think the biggest issue for me was the time when we were trying to break the barriers of discrimination in the area of employment and public accommodations within Pocatello, and I feel that that was something I was very proud of to play a role in doing that.

KW: You were hired at the state?

IP: Yes, I used to work--in fact, I took early retirement from Job Service, State Employment. I was the first African-American hired by them within the state. After having been there seven years, they have this merit award that they give the most outstanding employee of the department within the state, and I won that. I was awarded that merit award for outstanding meritorial work and, along with the award, won a trip for my husband and myself to Atlanta to the national conference. When I retired, I was supervisor of all job training programs, federal programs, in the seven county areas. So, yeah, I worked for the state. [laughter] That was what I was paid for.

KW: When you applied for this job, was there a lot of opposition against you being hired as the first black American?

IP: There was not opposition because it became a mandate that the doors to United States Employment Service nationally was going to be opened to minorities, and so I was hired there. There was not opposition. It was very welcoming on the

part of the employer, Job Service. I certainly received a very cold, not too welcoming, from older employees there who were very set in their way of doing things, particularly the job service consultants who handled all of the referrals to jobs who in the past had always never looked at qualification of African-Americans or Mexicans or Native Americans for jobs. It was always referring them to maid positions. I mean, in that individual's mind and having me there as a consultant in the same position she was in and having me there as a person who could observe the kinds of information she was giving out and who could gently go to her and say, "So, you know, I think we have job orders that that individual could have been referred to, and I overheard you referring her to, you know. I think, perhaps, you know, that's something you might want to reconsider." You know, that was my approach with her. Of course, she didn't-- She was queen bee so she could-- [laughter]

KW: Was there several women employed at this time with them, that certain organization, or were there just a few of you that worked there?

IP: At Job Service?

KW: Yes.

IP: No, I was the only African-American there. In fact, I was the only minority person.

KW: How about as far as other women?

IP: Oh, there were other women working. Oh, yes. Oh, yes, Job Service was known

for hiring women. In fact, as I've said, the individual who was doing the discriminatory referrals was a woman, an older woman who, I mean, you know, in fairness to her, I think she thought that she was doing what the employer wanted, not trying to educate the employer to the new laws and opening doors. She just saw herself as servicing the employer and really not sending him the best candidates but sending him someone who she felt would be acceptable to him without asking him, without looking at his order. If you have to know the system, I think of Job Service for you to understand what I am saying.

KW: Do you think any changes have occurred over the years about that?

IP: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

KW: [words unclear]

IP: A big growth, and I believe that I was very instrumental in not only opening up the doors to African-Americans and other minorities getting good job referrals that they were qualified for but, also, opening up the doors with other employers who would call me and say, "You know, I would like to hire an African-American, Native American. Some of this is what I'm looking for." I would do outreach within the community to fill that employer's request so many people, many men, who had recently retired from FMC, the telephone company, those corporations who were paying employees $13, $14, $15 an hour, that African-American, Native American, and other minorities could then, you know, be employed in. You know, I feel real good about that, in fact, to the point of being very embarrassed

sometimes when people say to me, "You know, you're responsible for me getting my job, that job I had," and I only say, "You know, I open the door, and you were hired, and you made the best of the situation. I just opened the door for you. That's all."

KW: That's great. How did your family respond to all your involvement and everything?

IP: Well, I don't know. Well, I think very supportive and very proudly, I think, you know. Someone would say, "Well, where's your mother?" "Oh, you know, Mom is at another meeting. She's doing this." You know. I think it was--

KW: So, they didn't find it odd. They never said, "You know, Mom, my friends' mothers are always at home. You know, why are you off running around?" Did they ever question that?

IP: Oh, no. At least, they never questioned it to me because, of course, home was number one. I guess I was doing time management before it was politically correct thing to do and I, you know, that was what I wanted to do. I wanted to be able to volunteer to be involved here and so I had a family and a job. So, you know, I made sure that my family had food and their clothes and, then, I was doing-- Because, after all, I'm a person. I'm a mother and a wife, but I'm also a person who has needs and some of my needs had to be met. How I met my needs was doing the kinds of things that made me happy and it was volunteering. So, I never gave that up because that was for me and, I think, we as women have to always do

something for us, for ourselves, not forget that we're important.

KW: I agree.

IP: Hopefully, you know, our families will see that it's important for them also to have a wife and a mother who cares about other people.

KW: Exactly. Especially today. I think we really need to.

IP: Be concerned?

KW: Yeah. I understand that your children though are involved and your husband as well?

IP: Yes.

KW: So, it's actually become a whole family at work for the betterment of society.

IP: Yes. I think that John and I developed an environment for our children where it became a natural thing to, if asked to serve, to serve on committees, boards. They saw us doing it as I saw my mother, and it just became a natural thing.

KW: Great. Okay. It asks here which clubs or organizations did you join? When I was talking to Afton Falter, I mean, the list just goes on and on. Is that the same for you also?

IP: Well, I joined--I never asked, "Could I be a part of your club?" I was always asked to join in some of the, as I'm sure Afton was, but you know, I belong to the Soroptimist over the years, which is a very important organization. It gives a lot of good work, a lot of good scholarships, for the community. Back when African-Americans lived in a community, within a community of ourselves, we were not

invited to be part of the larger communities' activities, we had what we called "The Gardenia Club." This was for adult, for the adult African-American women who met socially on a night and played cards, all the things that, I guess--it's not [words unclear] but I'm sure it's activities that went on with white women, you know, and we called ourselves "The Gardenia Club." I was also a member of the Eastern Star because African-Americans--Eastern Star was not a part of that majority group. My husband was Masonic because African-Americans had their own lodge. They are not a part or welcomed in the Masonic Temple here in Pocatello.

KW: Really.

IP: In those days. Just recently, have changed. But, I think, up until the past three or four years, I would say that that's true.

KW: I realize that. I think it was the same for the Elk's organization, too.

IP: Yes, and there was a black Elks, black Masonic, and black American Legion Club. One time--for a number of years, I've been registrar for voting because, I think, that's very important for people to vote and always encouraged African-Americans. I think that's where they make their wants and needs known by who they vote for. John is a precinct person for our precinct area so I have been involved in politics that way. I never ran for office, never wanted to.

KW: So, a lot of these-- Well, I know the Soroptomist is very active with education. Was that [words unclear] a lot of the focus of this organizations at that time was

set on education?

IP: No, I really--looking at the Gardenia Club, it was not education. It was social.

KW: It was just social?

IP: For women to get together, to meet, to have somewhere to go.

KW: Support group?

IP: Support group. Absolutely. Very important. Very important.

KW: I feel that myself these days. Let's see. We've talked about the high point.

[Tape turned off and on]

IP: Obstacles put in your way, but that doesn't mean that you cannot succeed if you want to.

KW: Exactly. It's amazing that our mothers can have such a big influence as I'm sure your daughters will say. I was talking to my mom not too long ago actually, and she was sitting there saying, "I guess I don't know if I did a good enough job." It's like, "Oh, Mom. You just don't realize the impact that you've had on our lives." It's amazing. We've hardly discussed what you feel the high point of your political activism is. If you could live anything over, what would that be?

IP: [pause] Gee, I've never tried to look back. I always try to look forward because I feel there's so much ahead of me and really cannot do anything about looking back and regretting something. I feel that I have really been blessed and had a lot of opportunities, and I really can't say if there's anything that I'd do differently.

KW: What issues do you feel are still unresolved for women?

IP: Well, I guess, we have to take a look at the abortion issue. I certainly would--my wish that--what always bothered me, but it's always been men. My husband and I discuss this all the time. When I see some legislator or senator talking about abortion, I think, "You guys don't even have children. You don't even, you know, can't get pregnant, you make people pregnant, and here you're telling us what we should do with our bodies." I always hoped that that issue could finally be laid to rest in terms of people recognizing, and men, organizations, coming together and saying, "You know, after all, women do have a right to make a decision about what happens to their body." It always become so emotional and distorted, you know, and I just always wished that it would not become that political at all that it always becomes. I would hope that Roe vs. Wade will never be able to turn.

KW: I'm, you know, at my point of life right now, I'm really worried about--

[Tape turned off and on]

Healthcare is a scary thing, I mean, even more prevalent, you know, every day.

IP: And issues of child care for women. Somehow finding it. How we can develop a comfort level for women to leave their children and return to the work force if that's what they choose to do, that they know that they have good child care providers. You know, with all the awful tales we hear about child molestation and what occurs in daycare, it makes it difficult for the women to trust their provider. It's too bad that you cannot go back to the old way where we had grandmothers, and I say go back to the old way, but that perhaps not grandmothers but a family

member, a family, an aunt, to leave the child with. Maybe, maybe, that would help, and I say this because I have a daughter, my youngest daughter, who recently had a baby in November of this past year. Her employment, she's director of media for a small college in Olympia, Washington, and they're allowed three months off their job for, you know, recovery and to bond with the child. It was very hard for her to go back to work even though she has excellent childcare. It's just a difficult difficult thing, and I just wished that, you know, for me, I wished I could be near, that I could-- My husband says, "With your busy life, how could you take it?" I said, "Well, I could fit her in." [laughter] But childcare is an issue for women. I don't know how major it is.

END OF SIDE 1

SIDE 2

IP: There is an issue with the women. I don't know how major it is. I just think there's so many, you know, our world, you know, there are many days that we wake up or we read what's going on and we just, as women, wonder how we can protect our grandchildren. We have grandchildren. Or, how we can teach them to look out for and always be cautious of their environment, where they are, who they're with, what's going on.

KW: So, I, you know, my drive here this morning, I heard on the radio that, I don't know for sure if it was a bill that was going or was proposed in legislation, that the grandparents were going to be made responsible for babies of young girls who

could not take care of them. And I just, as I drove--on one hand, I can see that as being good because it's like, you know, who's going to be responsible. Someone has to.

IP: Financially responsible.

KW: Yeah.

IP: I mean that's the key point.

KW: On the other hand, I find it quiet sad that, you know, our society is having to look at issues such as this because nobody, our young children, have felt that no one was responsible for them, you know, when they were growing up. I find that issue very sad and dealing with that also.

[Tape turned off and on]

I want to discuss affirmative action just a little bit. I talked to Dr. Mary Ellen Walsh about that, and it's a main concern for her, too. Do you feel that that's being threatened, and do you have any ideas of what we need to do to make sure that it isn't dissolved?

IP: Well, I certainly believe that what we hear our legislators in Congress saying that there's a threat of it being overturned or clock being turned back. I think we've seen some of that in California, Governor Wilson and the regents at the University of California. I'm not sure what we can do to maintain--I'm sure affirmative action programs because, I think, whatever progress that we as women have seen and the minority population have seen has come about through affirmative action

taking a look at the workforce, seeing where we were deficient, looking at the population which was served and lived, town and events and see if people that look like those people living in that town are working in your workforce. To me, that's the way I've always looked at it. You know, I'm sure that there's been some abuse of it. I keep hearing about, you know, some wealthy person's son and that he doesn't need affirmative action but, because he was a minority, he got it or, you know, I'm sure there's some of that may have gone on. But, I think, the main thrust of what affirmative action was supposed to do is still valid, in my opinion, and I wouldn't, you know, but I think we--I think those of us who care really need to be vigilante to find out what actions are being taken in what areas, especially in the areas where we live, you know, this university.

KW: Exactly. So, basically, it's, you know--we may have taken several baby steps, but we can't put our guard down.

IP: No. No. No. We can't. We just certainly can't.

KW: Certainly, [words unclear], is there there anything else that you would like to add that you feel-- [pause]

IP: I guess, only thing I'd like to add is that I have a great concern living in Idaho about the hate organizations that we see raising their ugly heads, and many of them so close to where we live. I understand Idaho Falls is having a lot of violence perpetrated upon minority folks, and I always think that we lost--that President Reagan may have been a great president but I think he damaged race relations for

our country. I don't think that he showed leadership in that area and I think that's why so many of the militia groups and the other white supremacy groups feel that it's okay to arm themselves to do all these sort of things that has potential to destroy our country. Because in Idaho Falls, that's a cliche but it's true. You know, it's really true, and our country is going through, for me, some real scary times right now.

KW: If a young person were to ask you how they could become involved and to help, what would you tell them? Where would you lead them?

IP: Well, I guess, I'd have to ask them some questions. What about what is going on in your community or your life that makes you feel that you want to be involved to change or to contribute? I'd have to find out, you know, that from them. Then, I think, then, I can best tell them in my opinion where they--what area--where they could find information but, you know, I certainly wouldn't feel that I'd best served them by just saying, "Oh, well, you need to go join this, and you need to go join that." I think I'd want to know, you know, why this great need and what it is that's concerning them making them feel that they want to become a part of something to make change. Because, I think, volunteering, you're kind of saying, "You know, I want to find out what's going on and see if I can make it better, or worse." [laughter]

KW: Yeah. I find that I have felt that, you know, talking to all the women that I have talked to, that I certainly admire everything that you have done and, I think, that

you're an inspiration, you know, to the younger generation.

IP: Well, thank you.

KW: Hopefully, you will inspire some of us to become more active and so our voice be heard.

IP: Thank you. Thank you very much, and thank you for the opportunity to chat with you. It's always good. I, always at first, feel a little scary about it. I think, "Oh, God. I don't want to be taped. I don't want my words to be somewhere stored forever." [laughter] But, you know, why not?

KW: Why not? You know, I don't know if you're familiar with Annie Pike Greenwood. I read her book just last semester, and I am so glad that we have that book. I would wish, you know, every young girl to read this. I mean, you know, look at the period whenever she wrote that. You know, we think that we've come so far, and we haven't.

IP: Okay, are you finished with it?

END OF SIDE 2

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Angela M. Carney, February 16, 1999; audited by Linda Morton-Keithley, March 3, 1999; corrections entered by Angela M. Carney, March 3, 1999.